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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 004390

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV BD

SUBJECT: UNDP INITIATES CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS ACTION

SUB-GROUP

REF: DHAKA 1558

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Judith Chammas, Reason(s): 1.4 (b)

11. (C) Summary: UNDP and donor ambassadors met on enhancing economic development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). UNDP's Lissner said he plans to have UN Secretary General Kofi Annan raise the CHT when he meets with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at the UNGA. Charge briefed ambassadors on her August trip to the CHT (septel). End Summary.

12. (C) On August 30, UNDP Resident Representative Jorgen Lissner briefed ambassadors who have either a "financial engagement or serious interest" in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The group included Australia, Denmark, the European Commission, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the US. The US contributed \$3.2 million in USAID Quick Impact Funds over the past two years (reftel). Lissner proposed a "CHT Consortium" among interested nations to better focus economic development efforts.

13. (C) Lissner said that the ruling BNP, which considers the CHT tribes as pro-Awami League, the ruling coalition partner Jamaat Islami which dislikes the Buddhists in the CHT, and the thinly disguised BNP anti-tribal group, the Equal Rights Movement, funded by either the Army or the BNP, seek to undermine tribal social and economic progress. Donors, he said, are considered pro-tribal, and the CHT Development Board, led by Wadud Bhuiyan, is badly managed and has failed to develop the CHT.

14. (C) Lissner said that the UNDP's five-year CHT Economic Development Plan had changed several times to accommodate government demands, each time becoming more pro-Bengali, yet the government, which approved it in March, has not approved a needed related document authorizing UNDP to begin work. Lissner said that after the government approved the five-year plan, elements of the Army, uncomfortable with increasing numbers of outsiders visiting the CHT, became hesitant in granting additional approvals. He gave as an example the Army rejection of a UNDP proposed construction of a commonly used UNDP internet communication V-Sat installation. The rejection letter, which he showed to participants, objected that the V-Sat installation would permit people in the Hill Tracts increased communications with the outside world, and "miscreants could use the V-Sat to spread news about the CHT to the world media." He quoted one prominent government official, who criticized the Army rejection, saying that since it's easy to get email in the CHT commercially, denial of the UNDP V-Sat was "silly."

15. (C) Lissner said that he believes the Army, which considers the CHT as "theirs" and enjoys tapping its forestry and other resources, is starting to withdraw its tacit support for international aid efforts in the CHT. In reaction to this recent resistance to UNDP's efforts, Lissner said that he has asked for the UN Secretary General to raise with Zia when she meets with him at the UNGA in September.

16. (C) Charge briefed ambassadors on her recent trip to the CHT (septel). She said that security was a continuing issue, but that she received conflicting observations from groups she met with on the continued need for the Army. She added that she was surprised to learn that 30,000 Army troops are in the CHT, that journalists as well as the Equal Rights Movement accused UNDP of neglecting Bengalis and openly preferring tribals, and that the journalists accused UNDP of being secretive with their activities in the CHT.

17. (C) Outgoing European Commission Ambassador Esko Kentrschynkyj said the new Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff told him that the Army was scaling back its presence in the CHT, that the police are ethnically mixed with Bengalis and tribals, and any "land grabbing" Bengalis are arrested by the Army and turned over to the police. He said the Chief offered his staff to sit with UNDP to better coordinate activities. Lissner said that UNDP, as a development agency, never works with the military.

18. (C) Lissner said that when UNDP first began operating in the CHT, the government did not expect development efforts to be successful. He said that the Army was shocked that tribals could learn advanced farming techniques and progressive marketing from UNDP workers. The reason for the new government resistance to UNDP's efforts may be tied to

the coming national elections, he said, because the Equal Rights Movement has struck a chord with many Bengalis, and that donor interest in supporting projects in the CHT has increased. These factors, he speculated, when combined with the different interests of the Army, Jamaat Islami, and Wadud Bhuiyan's closeness to PM Zia's son Tarique Rahman, fuel the BNP government's discomfort with foreigners in the CHT.

CHAMMAS